

She Opened a Book Slowly: How Urban Girls Found Their Literate Identities in Book Group

Ginger Goldman Malin

Lover of Books

*She opened a book
Carefully, Slowly
Each word was absorbed, eaten like a huge
Sunday dinner
She ate until full
She questioned, listened, learned, taught, laughed,
struggled
But through it all
She opened a book
Carefully, Slowly
She had peace while in this book
She explored, went away for a moment
She hugged the book, and imagined herself
jumping into the pages
She opened a book and released her true self
Released it like a white dove into a soft cloud
She, a mother and lover of words
A lover of rhythm, and thoughts
She opened a book and learned
Learned how to read for pleasure for the sake of
pleasure
For the sake of togetherness,
Sisterhood, Strength, Respect and Care
Around our table she read
While words floated around her head
She learned
She became a lover of words
While Carefully and Slowly opening a book.*

- Ana (participant in Robins Alternative
School Book Group)

Introduction

By introducing high quality, engaging, multicultural literature (appendix #1) to twelve Mexican-American adolescent women in the Robins Alternative School Book Group, the Literature Sisters organization, and particularly its leader, Kathy Tillman, helped participants come to enjoy reading and responding to literature and to develop a literate identity. Through their transactions with literature, group members were able to live through texts (Rosenblatt, 1978) and evoke responses that the young women and Kathy shared, discussed, and collaboratively examined in weekly sessions. These conversations enhanced existing perspectives and views, while also serving to help the young women transform and construct new understandings. In this way, the book group became an intimate literate community that enabled its participants to learn how to engage in literate practices such as negotiating, comparing, evaluating, predicting, and reflecting on literature.

The concept of literacy described here comes from an understanding that “to be literate is to have the disposition to engage appropriately with texts of different types in order to empower action, thinking, and feeling in the context of purposeful social activity” (Wells, 1990, p. 379). Understood in this way, literacy refers to more than just an individual’s ability to read and write—it is invariably tied to the purposes involved in interacting or transacting with literature and the contexts in which these events take place.

At the beginning of the book group program, many (10 out of 12) of these young women considered themselves “non-readers” (survey, September) and felt that “reading was not a thing I did for me...I did it for school” (interview, February). Yet, by the end of the year, all (12 out of 12) of the young women defined themselves as “readers and writers” (survey, May) and saw literacy as essential to who they were as people.

Purpose of this Study

In this study, the young women came together to read and collaboratively construct meaning from literature and, in doing so, successfully constructed literate identities. Although the girls’ collaborative talk about the texts provided the opportunity for communal meaning-making, their written poetry became the major way that they documented their growing understandings, thoughts and feelings. It is the purpose of this article to describe how the poetry of these young women became the vehicle that encouraged them to articulate and validate their meanings and, thus, become truly literate.

Methodology & Participants

This paper offers data gathered from a one-year ethnographic study of an all-female adolescent book group that was located in an alternative urban high school on the south-side of Chicago. All 12 participants were self-defined Mexican-Americans ranging in age from 16-21 years. The data for this study included transcripts of 26 audio-taped book group sessions, responses from two surveys, fieldnotes from book group sessions and field trips, poetry produced by the participants, and transcriptions of formal interviews with the three teachers, the book group leader, and 12 young women.

Elise J. Robins Alternative High School served 29 students (12 girls and 17 boys) who had been expelled from public school or who had previously dropped out of the public school setting. The population was 97% Mexican-American with the other 3% consisting of students from Arab-American, Puerto Rican, and Polish-American backgrounds. All

12 book group members defined themselves as being of Mexican descent.

This group met for one hour once a week as part of the school curriculum. To gather data as a participant-observer, I attended every book group session for an entire school year (August through June). The school’s mission and policies required all students to participate in a same-gender reflections group where they could discuss issues related to identity, social grouping (such as gangs), self-esteem, and self-empowerment. The boys met weekly with a male teacher at the school while the girls met with Kathy in book group. Although actual participation in the group’s activities was voluntary, attendance was mandatory.

The twelve girls in this book group voluntarily agreed to participate in this study. Seven book group members participated for the entire year (Ana, Gloria, Lisa, Lupe, Maria, Sandra, and Sonia), two members left the school after one semester (Estee and Lea), and three members joined the group during the second semester (Eva, Lola, and Stacia). Four of the participants in the group were mothers (Ana, Lea, Lupe, and Sandra), and the school identified all of the other girls as at-risk for early motherhood. Since I had more time to get to know the seven girls who participated in book group for the entire year, they became the major informants for this study.

Selecting Texts that Inspire Connections and Conversations

One of Kathy’s roles as book group leader was to “expose the young women to powerful feminist thought through literature so that they learn the language of power in order to use it for their own benefit” (interview, March). Kathy chose books in a genre that she referred to as women’s literature. These were works that were generally written by women and addressed the communal triumphs, hardships, histories, and experiences of women. In particular, the five books that were read and discussed in book group dealt with issues of sexuality, gender stereotypes, racism, sexism, and mother-daughter relationships. These books were chosen to expose the participants to other people and

to differing perspectives so that they would be better equipped to make decisions and choices about their present situations and future interests. As they learned to communicate their understandings, they were able to begin defining their literate identities that, in turn, led to increases in their self-confidence as readers, writers, thinkers, and women.

The canonized texts that are typically taught in traditional school settings often do not often reflect the histories, languages, experiences, and viewpoints of the students who are required to read them. Texts that depict these students' experiences are categorized under the term "multicultural literature," and they have been marginalized and reduced to a status of being supplemental to the literary canon (Willis, 1997). However, these texts often are very well written and reflect universal themes in the history, life experiences, culture, and literature of all people. Many of these texts were written by women and have long been used by women's book groups because they speak directly to the concerns of women. Miller & Legge (1999) note that these texts also trigger important conversations and connections among women because they legitimize and validate both their collective experience as women and their individual situations as females.

For similar reasons, Kathy Tillman chose mostly multicultural literature to share with the young women in this book group. Their personal growth and strength was further enhanced through literature discussions and poetry writing. These literary activities served as vehicles for the young women to share their own experiences, thus rendering them valid and important. The group also provided a context within which to practice the thinking strategies necessary to consider and ultimately challenge various injustices and reconsider how they want to live their lives.

Feeling Empowered Through Writing Poetry

The poetry that the girls wrote allowed them to further reflect on the literature and ideas sparked in the discussion. Many of the girls indicated that writing poetry helped them to feel creative and artistic and gave them an outlet to thoughtfully react

to an experience by expressing feelings of fear, anger, joy, pain, or sadness (whole group interview, March). The girls indicated an understanding that their writing was read and listened to for its content and artistry rather than evaluated for form and grammar, which they understood as the purpose of their other school work. Even though some of the members did not often participate in discussion, their voices were still heard through their poetry. These poems were read to the group and then praised and applauded. Each girl generally chose five poems to submit to Kathy for possible inclusion in the poetry anthology published by the organization. Group members also performed their poetry for larger audiences at fundraisers and coffee shops, where they were further able to validate their life experiences as they created their literate identities.

One recurrent theme that emerged involved the girls' relationships with their mothers. A majority of research on mother-daughter relationships has focused primarily on white, middle-class teens from suburban environments (Way, 1996). This research shows that, as they age through adolescence, girls' needs for close relationships with people in whom they can confide is vital to their psychological health (Finders, 1997; Pipher, 1994; Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995). Yet, many of the subjects in these studies spoke about distrusting their boyfriends, being betrayed by their female friends, and not feeling comfortable sharing their experiences or ideas with their mothers. These negative experiences left them with few options for safely engaging in intimate relationships. In addition, researchers report that girls feel they need to conform to what others want them to say, think, and feel in order to become part of a social setting (Finders, 1997). However, like most teenagers, they may also perceive that entering adulthood requires them to separate from others, especially their parents, to become more independent (Muuss, 1996). Taylor and her colleagues (1995) described this transitional period as a dangerous crossroad for girls in particular because "either they will give up their voices to others...or they will give up their relationships with others and learn to be self-sufficient, entire unto themselves" (p. 24).

In discussing their responses to literature, the girls in this study shared feelings of distrust and instances of betrayal similar to those reported by the white middle-class teens in the studies described above. Although many of the book group members desired relationships in which they would find support and intimacy with their mothers, they often distanced themselves so that they could feel protected and independent. Examples of these tensions emerged as group members explored their ideas about mother-daughter relationships and wrote about their ideal mothers after reading the book *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (Danticat, 1994), a story about the experiences of a mother and daughter from Haiti.

A Good Mother

A good mother
is someone who respects her child.
A good mother
is someone who cares for the well being of her
child.
A good mother
believes and trusts her child
A good mother
loves her child, no matter what.
A good mother
is my mother
and I am her child.

By Lupe

My Ideal Mother

Mom, as I sit and wonder how our friendship can
be.
When you hold me in your arms
I feel your love for me
Could this love go on forever?
I need your love now as a mother
And a friend.

By Lea

My Ideal Mom

My ideal mom would be someone who is always
there.
I wouldn't ask for much,
just a mom to talk with, walk with, shop with.

The little things I missed out on as I grew:
someone I would be able to cry with, laugh with,
even just
dye my hair with.
Someone I could bring my friends with,
buy my first bra with;
Someone to be there when I got my first period;
Someone to be there for all the mother-daughter
sleepovers
My ideal mom would just have to be a normal
mom.

By Gloria

My Ideal Mother

My ideal mother wouldn't make me suffer;
she wouldn't care more about her lover than
her own daughter.
My ideal mother would show me love
instead of hate
My ideal mother would bring me joy
instead of tears, instead of fears.
My ideal mother would love me!
She would show me love instead of
showing me her fist, pounding on my soul!
Letting all my goals and dreams go!
My ideal mother would never hurt my soul.

By Ana

These poems show that these urban, Mexican-American girls, like the white middle-class girls who participated in the research studies, also longed for love and friendship from their mothers. For them, an ideal mother would be "loving, trusting, and respectful." Yet, as implied in all four poetry examples, the girls' own mothers did not meet their ideal expectations of what a mother could or should be, and they did not provide the intimate safe relationship that they needed. In fact, they felt betrayed and isolated by their mothers and did not see their mothers as safe people in whom they could confide. These poems were particularly important for Ana, Lea and Lupe as they are already mothers themselves, and the literature discussion and their subsequent reflective writing allowed them to

consider what kind of mothers they want to be for their children.

Because the literature provided an ample amount of opportunity to examine the characters' relationships, these young women were able to use literate response as a vehicle for self-reflection and a mechanism to consider what they would possibly want in their own relationships. Through this literary process, the young women considered aspects of the characters' relationships, related them to their own relationships, compared them to other participants' perspectives; and then, through writing, were able to articulate and sort out their amended perspectives. As such, this literate process led to a broader insight and a greater awareness of the kinds of relationships they would ideally desire, and a beginning for recognizing how to obtain them.

Implications

The mission of this book group was to empower young women. Kathy believed that empowerment came from "being recognized by yourself and by others as a strong, confident, intelligent woman" (interview, March). To do this, Kathy established a context for the participants to read, listen, speak, think and write about their experiences thus making their feelings "available to introspection and revision" (Livdahl, Wallman, Herbert, Geiger, & Anderson, 1995, p. 9). In practicing this type of critical reflective response, these young women were able to reveal the strength and knowledge that they always possessed but had not yet either discovered or validated.

The participants explained that they were not encouraged in school to express their thoughts or feelings evoked by literature. When Ana described her school experiences with reading, she said, "I'm not that good at school. It's always like being told what the book is about by our teacher and we never get to talk about it like we do in here [book group]. It is always like a test, not like, you know, just reading. I hate it, and I fail my classes because I don't like to read" (interview, February). Many of the other participants expressed similar trouble with school reading and compared their failure at it with their

successful feelings of reading in book group. For example, Sandra explained that, "In book group, we are all readers. I don't get along that well with everyone in school, but when we come here we all have reading in common, even if someone isn't that good of a reader...It brings us together as women because we talk about issues that are important to us. We learn from the books and from each other" (interview, February). This kind of feeling, one of coming together to discuss books and share ideas, is a common thread that runs through much of the research literature on women's book discussion groups (Gonzalez, 1997; Long, 1986, 1992; Sichertman, 1989).

Similar to the findings about women's book groups, this book group environment empowered its participants by offering them the tools and opportunities to explore the world through reading and responding to literature. Literary discussion groups can provide readers with a community and setting whereby they can examine their own and others' meanings constructed from literature. Since adolescence is a time when people are negotiating their identities in order to make the transition into adulthood, literature discussions that focus on and explore issues of self as related to such concepts as gender, culture, or social status could help smooth out these difficult and sometimes painful transitions. Furthermore, by asking questions and discussing responses, book group leaders can give adolescent participants the "opportunity to talk through—and thereby think through—issues of importance to them... that may help them cultivate their ability to make thoughtful and responsible decisions" (Taylor et. al., 1995, p. 121). This type of dialogic relationship with an adult fosters adolescents' ability to recognize the infinite possibilities that life has to offer them and begin to plan a way to recognize these possibilities.

Although it is important for all people to learn and practice thinking in this critical way, adolescents, and adolescent girls in particular, are at a stage in life when reflective and empathetic thinking is highly beneficial to their psychological health. Developmentally, adolescence is a time when people

ask the questions “Who am I?” and “What do I want to become?” (Erickson, 1968). According to Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan (1995), as girls enter adulthood, they are at a high risk for losing touch with what they know through experience because “their social location of class, gender, age, and for many, race or ethnicity, places them in a socially marginalized position that does not grant a public hearing of their experience, strength, or knowledge” (pp. 17-18). By engaging in conversations with others who value their stories and experiences, as was the case in this book group, girls are given the opportunity to explore and critique important life issues.

In this study, both the school and the book group organization philosophically maintained that through literate practices, such as those that occur in a book group, readers can learn to see themselves as creative, powerful, and purposeful individuals. In constructing communal meanings, participants in book groups do more than simply practice rote reading skills; they use reading as a communication vehicle to better understand themselves and others’ worldviews (Malin, 2007). This context for communicating is also important in that it nurtures a sense of self-esteem, accomplishment, and hope within the participants. The attention to individual growth through literary response may not be typical within more traditional educational settings, yet it is the foundation and main goal of most women’s book groups.

This book group was obviously unique in terms of being held in an alternative school with all Latina girls; yet, there are some aspects that can be replicated in more traditional settings, including: 1) introducing adolescents to texts with which they can connect and engage, 2) creating space and time for students to share their personal responses to literature, both orally and in writing 3) adopting a general philosophy that, as an art form, literature has no one correct way to be interpreted—this will encourage more aesthetic readings of texts 4) training teachers to act as mentors for students—helping them to learn and practice literacy behaviors—that is, to use reading and writing as a

means to critically understand the choices, perspectives, and possibilities that exist in the world.

According to the International Reading Association Position Statement, (2005), the ultimate goal of secondary reading programs should be to develop independent readers and learners who are able to utilize and apply literacy strategies to various situations in order to stay informed and make appropriate choices. Book groups seem to offer potential information to help schools accomplish this task. If adolescents are to view reading and writing as important acts that are worth pursuing and if they are to become literate lifelong learners, they need to become part of a literate community in which they can collaborate with others to further their understandings. Being a member of this kind of community means that they will have opportunities to respond to literature in authentic ways and compose texts that help them to express their ideas and feelings. The first step in doing this is to introduce young people to texts with which they can connect and engage. When they are engaged with texts, they will naturally make connections to them. They need to understand that making these personal connections is a strategy that good readers use to make sense of what they are reading and to construct meaning. In doing so, they will have reasons to share their responses, both orally and in writing, with others and subsequently form a literary circle with whom to examine their tentative meanings and determine those that best help them achieve their goals and reflect their beliefs.

Although the topics and texts that were introduced in this book group may have been too sensitive or risqué to share in typical classroom settings, they were within the boundaries of appropriate conversation material for this context. It is important to note that while the specific topics may be too personal to share in a larger and less intimate setting, it does not mean that a teacher should refrain from addressing important social and political issues such as sexism or racism with students. In an effort to stay neutral and unbiased because of their own fears and uncomfortable feelings, many teachers tend to virtually ignore these issues in classroom discussions

of literature. Such topics will also most likely not be brought up by adolescents on their own, and yet these concepts are vital for them to consider as they are forming their own beliefs and identities.

As these issues affect the daily lives of all students, they are critically important to them. Perhaps the most vital aspect of ensuring involvement from the girls in this book group was that the topics were salient to them (as they initiated many of them), and their ideas were indeed validated. Therefore, the second step to forming a literate community would be to ensure that all ideas and voices are heard and respected. If the community has both males and females, or if it is situated in a more traditional setting, evoking authentic responses may be a more difficult task, but these concerns should not preclude the group from discussing or responding to topics that are salient and important. However, based on this study, it seems clear that the girls responded differently in this same-sex group than they would have in a mixed-sex group, which is an important consideration. As such, teachers may want to provide opportunities for females and males to work in same-sex book groups to promote responses to topics that may be sensitive or off limits to discussants interacting with the opposite sex.

Another important aspect would be to create an atmosphere where sharing and exploring ideas as a group is encouraged. This means creating an environment that fosters conversation. For instance, in this book group, the girls sat around a table. A bright tablecloth hid the badly scarred wooden table. They also often had snacks and drinks so they would feel comfortable and at ease. Despite the fact that it was normally a rather dingy basement, the room was transformed into a bright and inviting space for grand conversations during the book group sessions.

The facilitator's attitude was also a vital component contributing to the success of the group. In maintaining the mission of the organization, Kathy did more than just apply best practice teaching methods. Instead, she challenged the deficit view that many educators have regarding low-SES and ethnic-minority adolescents (Pappas, 1999). Rather than thinking of the participants as at-risk, the term

generally used to describe them, she regarded them as at-promise (Oyler, 1996) students. In seeing the young women this way, Kathy employed a humanizing pedagogy (Bartolome, 1994) that respected and incorporated their perspectives and history into the curriculum and into her practice. As the young women were afforded opportunities to respond to literature in these ways, they were able to realize their potential as readers, writers, and thinkers—major aspects of a literate identity.

Finally, the effects of book group went well beyond the book group borders. Through their participation, the young women learned to see literacy as a means to gain vital understandings about who they are and what they can achieve. The young women then extended this knowledge into other contexts such as school, home, and work, where they had opportunities to display their new literate identities. In interviews, many girls explained that they began to feel as though they could succeed in college now that they were better readers and writers. At home, they read the children's books that they were given in book group to their own children or to younger siblings. They also shared the adult books with family members and friends and discussed their responses. The young women also believed that their ability to read and write well could extend into their working lives as these were skills that were highly desired, if not required, by employers. Overall, in attaining a literate identity, the girls not only gained confidence in applying their literate behaviors in other contexts, but they also extended the book group community to include others as they shared literature and their passion for reading with their family and friends.

Summary

This study shows how important it is to make space for the necessary, yet often uncomfortable, conversations that can lead students to a new critical consciousness. By using literature as a starting place to initiate discussions on topics of concern, students have opportunities to practice literate strategies and reflect on important social and political constructs, which in turn can enable them to transform their own

beliefs and possibly their world. Even if this goal is difficult to achieve within a typical classroom setting, this study shows how important it is to offer occasions for young people, in this case adolescent women, to use exploratory talk and especially reflective poetry writing to construct meanings that support their learning and promote healthy life-long literate identities.

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APPENDIX 1
List of Texts

Title of Text	Month(s) Discussed
Danticat, E. (1994). <i>Breath, eyes, memory</i> . New York: Vintage Books.	August, September, October
Mataka, L. (1999). <i>The strong black woman is dead</i> .	September
Souljah, S. (1999). <i>The coldest winter ever</i> . New York: Pocket Books.	November
Cisneros, S. (1987). <i>My wicked, wicked ways</i> . New York: Alfred A. Knopf.	December
Anonymous (1971). <i>Go ask Alice</i> . New York: Simon & Schuster.	February
Behar, R. (1998). "La cortada." In J. C. Oates (Ed.), <i>Telling stories</i> . New York: W.W. Norton.	March
Jackson, S. (1997). <i>Li'l Mama's rules</i> . New York: Simon & Schuster.	April
Fitch, J. (1999). <i>White oleander</i> . New York: Little, Brown and Company.	May
Reilly, P. L. (1999). <i>Imagine a woman</i> . In B. Muten (Ed.), <i>Her words: An anthology of poetry about the great goddess</i> . Boston: Shambhala.	June